

Jack Suntrup | Post-Dispatch

**S**tate officials have suspended some federally funded health care services for Missourians living with HIV, a surprise move one St. Louis provider called "terribly disruptive" to patients.

The state informed providers of cuts to the Ryan White program last Monday, and ended support on Wednesday for mental health and substance use services, emergency rental and utility assistance.

Oral health care services will be suspended May 15, a state spokeswoman said.

Under the federal Ryan White program, which acts as a safety net for people living with HIV, a suite of services has been available to Missouri residents with HIV who earn at or below 300% of the federal poverty level. **This year**, that is \$47,880 for a single person.

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Missouri's cuts are not aimed at medications used to treat HIV and AIDS. The cuts to mental health services are for inpatient and outpatient services, not medications, the spokeswoman said.

"The program within DHSS has been exploring cost containment measures due to increases in program utilization, medication and insurance costs, and decreased rebates," DHSS spokeswoman Lisa Cox wrote in an emailed statement.

Advocates say the additional support available to disadvantaged patients helps ensure those patients continue with their treatment.

For Jeff Noble, 65, of Dutchtown, the changes mean he now will have to pay out of pocket for his next dental cleaning.

"I'll be able to make that happen," said Noble, the former owner of the Bouffant Daddy salon in Maplewood. "Something catastrophic ... I don't know what I'll do then."

Noble said he worries about people with fewer resources.

"Why do they have to suffer?" he asked.

Cox said "cost containment measures" will continue to be explored and implemented as needed "to ensure a balanced budget while also serving clients and maintaining program efficiency."

She said the suspension of services is expected to save the state \$1,961,000 in the next year, calling the change necessary to protect essential services, ensure a balanced budget and that long-term financial obligations are met.

Cox said Ryan White is a "payor of last resort," requiring clients to "vigorously pursue other resources and sources of funding before using Ryan White funds."

State legislators allocated more than \$100 million to the Ryan White program for the current fiscal year, which ends June 30, including some \$93 million in federal funds.

The cuts caught officials with Vivent Health, a Ryan White provider with a clinic at 2653 Locust Street, off guard.

"This was all very much news to us," said Bill Keeton, chief advocacy officer for Vivent Health, who called the move "terribly disruptive" to patients in the middle of treatment.

Keeton said other states have taken "significantly less drastic measures" with regard to Ryan White, such as reducing access to some of the "more cutting edge and more recent medications."

In Washington, **Republicans have pushed to slash** funding for HIV treatment and prevention.

"I've not seen anything as drastic as sending out a letter dated April 13 saying that effective April 15, we were going to end payment for these services," Keeton said.

"This has been a pretty drastic move that blindsided a lot of folks in Missouri."

According to Vivent, 628 of its St. Louis patients relied on Ryan White funding for dental care in the last year.

Keeton said the provider was unaware of the state's financial issues.

"We had no idea that the state was experiencing any sort of financial troubles as it related to the Ryan White program," he said.

Missouri is facing a tightening fiscal outlook with falling revenues and the elimination of federal pandemic relief funds. A budget surplus that stood at \$3 billion in June 2024 is expected to be nearly depleted by July 2027, prompting state leaders to look for ways to cut spending.

Vivent Health is the nonprofit health provider that emerged from **the 2018 merger** between St. Louis Effort for AIDS and the AIDS Resource Center of Wisconsin.

The clinic provides medical, dental, mental and behavioral health care. It has a pharmacy and a food pantry.

In addition, Vivent helps with legal services, and provides testing for sexually transmitted infections, as well as housing assistance. The center also provides free condoms and syringes.

The **Ryan White program** is named for an Indiana teen who died of AIDS in 1990, who was diagnosed at age 13 following a blood transfusion.

The program serves more than 600,000 people, or more than half of people diagnosed with HIV in the United States, **according to** the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration.

As of 2024, the vast majority of clients receiving HIV medical care — 91.4% — could not transmit the virus due to viral suppression, the agency said.

Vivent says its St. Louis viral suppression rate is 92.5%, touting its HIV care model that "fully integrates social services and HIV primary care."

In Missouri, there were 6,259 Ryan White clients as of this month, according to the state health department.

